

## Party Secretaries in Chinese Higher Education Institutions, Who Are They?

Hua Jiang  
*Northeastern University*

Xiaobin Li  
*Brock University*

With approximately 30 million students the Chinese higher education system is the largest in the world. In every publicly funded institution there is a communist party secretary, however, little is known about these party secretaries. The purpose of the study was to understand who these people were. We collected data from 1,751 party secretaries in Chinese higher education institutions and grouped party secretaries into eight types according to the institutions where they worked. We conducted multidimensional scaling analysis and cluster analysis to explore the differences among the eight party secretary types and to put them into categories. In addition, we compared the findings from this study to those from another study investigating the characteristics of higher education institution presidents to examine the differences between party secretaries and presidents. We conclude that party secretaries from whom data were collected are on average 55 years old, 92 percent are males, 76 percent are at the rank of professor, 29 percent have a doctorate degree, and 9 percent have an overseas degree. The eight types of party secretaries can be put into two categories; those in the first category are older, have been in position longer, and more of them have a doctorate degree. In comparison, party secretaries are more likely to be administrative leaders whereas presidents are more likely to be academic leaders.

**Key words:** *Party secretaries, higher education institutions, China*

The Chinese political party in power is the Communist Party of China. The party's influence is in most organizations, and higher education institutions are no exceptions. There are 1,715 publicly funded higher education institutions, 309 independent institutions, and 386 privately funded institutions, altogether 2,400 institutions approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education (May 2011a, May 2011b). Unlike most higher education institutions in the world, all Chinese publicly funded institutions and independent institutions have a communist party secretary and several deputy party secretaries, and most privately funded institutions have a party secretary.

In every publicly funded institution and independent institution, the party secretary has a huge influence on how the institution is administered. Even in privately funded institutions party secretaries have an important influence on administration and development. The most influential person in Chinese education, Minister of Education, Yuan Guiren, was the

party secretary of Beijing Normal University from 1996 to 2001 before he started working in the Ministry of Education as a Deputy Minister in 2001 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2011). Party secretaries play a leading role in Chinese higher education institutions, but who are these people? Outside China, there is no study to indicate who these party secretaries are. Even in China, few studies have been conducted to explain who they are.

### Literature Review

A literature search in English was conducted with "party secretary" as the key term to look into the data bases of Education Resource Information Center, Sociological Abstracts, Social Sciences Citation Index and Dissertation Abstracts, but the search produced nothing on party secretaries in Chinese higher education institutions. A literature search was also conducted in Chinese with the key terms of “大

学党委书记” (university party secretary) and “高校党委书记” (higher education institution party secretary) in the data base of Chinese Journal Network, which is the most comprehensive data base in the country containing Chinese journals, doctoral dissertations, master’s theses, proceedings from conferences, and important newspaper articles. The search has produced only eight articles, which are briefly synthesized in the following paragraphs.

There is a communist party committee in every Chinese higher education institution funded publicly and every independent institution. The party committee in an institution leads, organizes and teaches by precept and example, and is responsible for the direction, stable administration and selecting and training of senior administrators in the institution (Li, 2005). The party secretary of the committee is responsible for the functioning of the committee.

Gao (1999) states that Chinese higher education institution party secretaries need to make effort to become statesmen and educators. They need to transform themselves from administrators to scholars. This transformation is required by the unique functions of higher education institutions. Liu (2004) believes contemporary Chinese higher education institution party secretaries should have training and personal qualities in Marxist theories, ideology, morality, science, culture and advanced administration. Han (2008) claims that the party secretary in an institution should be a leader, not a professional administrator. The party secretary should be the centre of political influence, not the centre of administration. As a political leader, the party secretary should pay attention to establishing rapport in three respects: 1) the relationship between the party secretary and the party committee, 2) the relationship between the party secretary and the president, 3) the relationship between the party secretary and administrators he leads (Li, 2008).

The people higher education institution party secretaries work with are unique, different from the people party secretaries in other sectors work with. The people higher education institution party secretaries work with are unique because they are different from workers in factories and

farmers in the countryside. They are well-educated intellectuals with high personal qualities and advanced attainments. Higher education institutions have a high concentration of intellectuals from different fields with various orientations. These institutions are well-connected and well-informed places where talents are educated and from which these talents go to society (Wang, 2000).

Jiang, Guan, and Wang (2008) collected data on 1,028 higher education institution party secretaries and compared party secretaries with presidents. Their study concluded that the role party secretaries played was different from the role presidents played. Luo and Sun (2011) conducted a study investigating the personal qualities of party secretaries in 34 important universities. They analysed these party secretaries’ work experiences, degrees, specialities, academic careers, and research publications. They described the current situation of these party secretaries and made several recommendations as to how to improve the personal qualities of higher education institution party secretaries. Of the eight pieces of literature referred to above only two are empirical studies.

The Chinese Higher Education Act stipulates: “In every publicly funded higher education institution there shall be a committee of the Communist Party of China that leads the institution where the president is responsible for the administration. Following the Constitution of the Communist Party of China and the relevant regulations, this committee shall lead the work in the institution and support the president in independently and responsibly executing the powers and performing the duties of the presidency. To ensure that the tasks focused on cultivating talents are successfully accomplished, the committee shall lead mainly by following the policies of the Communist Party of China, staying in the socialist direction, directing ideological, political and moral education, having discussions to decide the internal structures and the related candidates of responsibilities, and having discussions to decide important issues related to the basic administrative system, development and reform.”

Since the Chinese law stipulates that party secretaries play a leading role in higher education institutions, which form the largest higher education system in the world with 30 million students, understanding who these party secretaries are is useful. The purpose of this study was to describe party secretaries in Chinese higher education institutions to answer the question: Who are these party secretaries? Analysis was also conducted to see whether there are differences among party secretaries from different types of institutions. In addition a comparison was made between party secretaries and presidents to examine their differences.

## Method

The 2,400 institutions approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education (May 2011a, May 2011b) can be put into eight types: 1) 985 project institutions, which are designated by the Ministry of Education after the former President of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Zemin, gave a speech on May 4, 1998, indicating the national government's intention of building world class universities to help modernize the country, with 985 standing for 1998 May; 2) 211 project institutions, which are 100 important institutions designated by the Ministry of Education to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with 211 standing for 21st century 100 important institutions ; all 985 project institutions are 211 project institutions, but the number of 985 institutions is smaller than that of 211 institutions; 3) institutions conferring doctorate degrees; 4) institutions conferring master's degrees; 5) institutions conferring bachelor's degrees; 6) independent institutions; 7) vocational institutions; and 8) privately funded institutions.

The first five types of institutions and vocational institutions are funded differently by governments at various levels with 985 institutions considered at the highest level and receiving the most funding per student. Independent institutions were started by some large universities to increase access to higher education in the last decade. Without government funding, independent institutions are private institutions, are more dependent on tuitions, and are more market oriented. Although

the eight types of institutions sometimes overlap, when we describe 211 institutions we exclude 985 institutions, and when we describe doctorate degree conferring institutions we exclude 985 institutions and 211 institutions, so on and so forth.

The websites of the 2,400 higher education institutions approved by the Ministry of Education provide institutional information, often including the curricula vitae of their party secretaries. We collected data in October 2011 on gender, age, time in position, academic rank, highest degree, speciality, work experience, overseas degree, and overseas study experience from 1,751 party secretaries, about 73 percent of the party secretaries from the 2,400 Ministry approved institutions. The other websites we looked at did not provide information, or enough information, on their party secretaries. It should be noted that not all information about the 1,751 party secretaries provided data on all the variables investigated.

## Results

After the data were collected, we conducted analyses to understand the characteristics of party secretaries to answer the research question. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of party secretaries from whom data were collected. It should be noted that due to rounding numbers do not always add up to 100 when percentages are used.

Table 1  
Characteristics of Party Secretaries (N= 1751)

N	1,751	Gender %	M 92	F 8
Average age	55	Average time in position (yr)		3.8
Professor or researcher %	76	Associate professor or researcher %		13
Other ranks %	9	No rank %		2
Doctorate degree %	29	Master's degree %		40
Bachelor's degree %	30	College diploma %		0
Others %	1			
Degree from same institution %	y 9      n 91			
Speciality %:				
engineering	23	science	11	
humanities	10	economics	9	
medicine	4	law	6	
administration	12	education	8	
philosophy	10	agriculture	1	
history	2	others	4	
Former position %:		deputy party secretary	24	
party secretary	27	vice president	8	Others 33
president	8			
Former position in same institution %	y 30      n 70			
Former position in education system %	y 78      n 22			
Overseas degree %	y 9      n 91	Overseas study %	y 18      n 82	

Data analysis results indicate that on average party secretaries are 55 years old, 92 percent of them are male and 8 percent are female. On average they have been in their position for 3.8 years, close to a one term appointment, which is usually 4 years. About 67 percent of them were in a higher education institution leadership position before receiving the current appointment. Leadership positions include the positions of party secretary, president, deputy party secretary, and vice president. Seventy-six percent are professors, or researchers who are at the same rank as professors, and 13 percent are associate professors or associate researchers. About 29 percent have a doctorate degree, and approximately 40 percent have a master's degree. Twenty-three percent have their highest degree in engineering, which is the largest group among all specialities.

Twenty-seven percent of them were party secretaries before they were appointed to the current position. Two things are possible for party secretaries whose former position was also party secretary: 1) their appointment was renewed; 2) they were transferred from another institution where they had been the party

secretary. Thirty percent were promoted to the current position from a position in the same institution. The majority of their former positions were not in the same institution, indicating that when party secretaries were appointed, the majority of the candidates were from other institutions or other places. Most party secretaries had their former position in the education system. Here the education system mainly refers to higher education institutions, education research institutes and departments of education in provincial governments. About 18 percent of them have studied overseas and 9 percent have at least one overseas degree.

Next we put party secretaries into eight institution types and further analyzed the data. Table 2 displays the data of the eight institution types.

Table 2  
Data on Party Secretaries in Eight Institution Types

	985	211	doctorate	master	bachelor	independent	vocational	private
Number	39	75	164	187	268	221	625	172
Gender %	M 87 F 13	M 90 F 10	M 95 F 5	M 92 F 8	M 93 F 7	M 95 F 5	M 92 F 8	M 91 F 9
Average age	58.1	54.9	54.8	54.7	55	53.8	52.9	57.1
Average time in position (yr)	4.6	4.8	3.8	4.1	3.7	3.6	3.6	2.5
Professor or Researcher %	91	92	90	84	79	57	55	56
Associate professor or Researcher %	0	2	5	8	12	34	15	27
Other ranks %	3	5	5	5	9	7	23	16
No rank %	6	1	0	3	0	2	7	1
Doctorate degree %	37	35	48	35	23	19	14	21
Master degree %	42	42	32	38	43	36	46	39
Bachelor degree %	19	22	19	26	32	44	37	40
College diploma %	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0
Others %	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
Any degree from same institution %	y 33 n 67	12 88	12 88	5 95	5 95	5 95	0 100	0 100
Speciality %:								
Engineering	39	17	17	21	18	32	14	23
Sciences	20	9	12	6	15	8	6	9
Humanities	0	12	11	10	8	15	7	13
Economics	16	11	9	12	7	4	12	2
Medicine	0	2	10	6	1	1	1	9
Law	6	2	7	4	2	3	11	12
Administration	3	8	8	12	21	11	19	17
Education	3	11	9	9	9	4	13	5
Philosophy	10	15	10	12	12	5	9	3
Agriculture	0	5	2	0	2	1	2	2
History	3	8	3	5	0	5	1	2
Others	0	0	2	3	5	11	5	3
Former position %:								
Party secretary	40	24	24	31	23	25	19	26
President	0	11	12	6	6	6	16	10
Deputy secretary	20	30	33	34	36	17	11	12
Vice president	11	12	9	6	5	6	6	11
Others	29	23	22	23	30	46	48	41
Former position in same institution %	y 31 n 69	31 69	38 62	31 69	23 77	60 40	18 82	12 88
Former position in education system %	y 77 n 23	92 8	81 19	79 21	75 25	86 14	58 42	76 24
Overseas	y 12	10	8	2	5	1	2	29

Degree %	n	88	90	92	98	95	99	98	71
Overseas	y	38	33	27	14	12	7	0	11
Study %	n	62	67	73	86	88	93	100	89

Statistics in table 2 indicate that party secretaries from vocational institutions are the largest group and party secretaries from 985 institutions are the smallest group. There are more female party secretaries in 985 institutions and 211 institutions. Party secretaries in 985 institutions are the oldest, suggesting that to be a party secretary in a 985 institution requires more experiences.

There are obvious differences with regard to the ranks of party secretaries from different institutions. There are more professor or researcher party secretaries in 985, 211 and doctorate degree granting institutions. Vocational institutions have the lowest proportion of professors and the highest proportion of other ranks. Other ranks refer not only to ranks lower than associate professor or associate researcher but also to professional ranks such as accountants, economists, etc. One reason may be that different institutions may have different requirements with regard to the rank of their party secretaries. It is worth noting that vocational institutions have the highest proportion of other ranks because of their practical orientation. Although most private institutions are also vocational institutions, their party secretaries have more advanced ranks than publicly funded vocational institutions. Two reasons are possible: 1) private institutions pay more attention to academic ranks when they hire a party secretary; 2) because their party secretaries are older than party secretaries in all institutions except for those in 985 institutions, they have more advanced ranks. The differences in the highest degree party secretaries have are also obvious. More party secretaries in 985, 211, doctorate degree conferring, and master's degree conferring institutions than those in other institutions have a doctorate degree.

When we look at whether party secretaries have any degree from the same institution where they work, we find that 985 institutions have the most party secretaries that obtained at least one degree from the same institution. No party secretaries in vocational and private institutions

have any degree from the same institution. This finding is understandable as most vocational and private institutions do not have the authority to confer even a bachelor's degree.

With regard to speciality, 985, independent, and private institutions have the largest group of party secretaries with their highest degree in engineering. No party secretaries in 985 institutions have their highest degree in humanities or medicine. Sixty percent of party secretaries in independent institutions are people who have worked in the large institution that started the independent institution. Vocational institutions are unique where almost half of the party secretaries' former position was outside of the education system. This may have something to do with their practical orientation and their hiring more people from outside of the education system.

Twenty-nine percent of party secretaries in private institutions, 12 percent of those in 985 institutions, and 10 percent in 211 institutions have at least one overseas degree. While the overall proportion of party secretaries with an overseas degree is low, more party secretaries in 985, 211, and doctorate degree conferring institutions have overseas study experiences.

The general trend in publicly funded institutions from vocational institutions to 985 institutions is that as the level of institutions become higher, party secretaries are older, have been in their position longer, more are professors with a doctorate degree, and more have an overseas degree and overseas study experiences. This is an indication suggesting that although the position of a party secretary is administrative, as the level of institutions become higher, the academic requirements become higher, or as party secretaries become older, the more advanced they are in their academic career.

All private institutions and independent institutions have a board of trustees. The Private Education Promotion Act stipulates that in private institutions and independent institutions the president shall be responsible for the administration of the institution, under the

leadership of the board of trustees. Still we find that many private institutions and all independent institutions have a party committee with a party secretary.

While the analysis discussed above provides some descriptive information, we do not really know how different party secretaries in the eight types of institutions are by simply looking at variables one by one. To see whether party secretaries in different institutions are different, we conducted multidimensional scaling analysis which would produce a graph to help us understand the differences intuitively, because a picture is often easier to interpret than a table of numbers. A particular advantage of multidimensional scaling graphs is that the distances between points can be interpreted intuitively. If two points on a multidimensional scaling graph are far apart from each other, they are quite different in the original matrix; if two points are close together, they are quite similar in the original matrix (George & Mallery, 2011).

To conduct multidimensional scaling analysis, we had to transform some of the data because they were not conducive to multidimensional scaling analysis. We used the sum of engineering, sciences, medicine and agriculture speciality percentages to indicate the percentage of these specialties together in all specialties, that is, engineering percentage + sciences percentage + medicine percentage + agriculture percentage = the sum of these specialty percentages. Similarly, we used the sum of former position as party secretary percentage and as deputy secretary percentage to indicate the percentage of these former positions among all former positions. Table 3 displays the transformed data.

Table 3 Transformed Data

	Percentage of engineering, sciences, medicine & agriculture specialties	Percentage of former party secretaries & deputy secretaries
985	59	60
211	33	54
doctorate	41	57
master's	33	65
bachelor's	36	59
independent	42	42
vocational	23	30
private	43	38

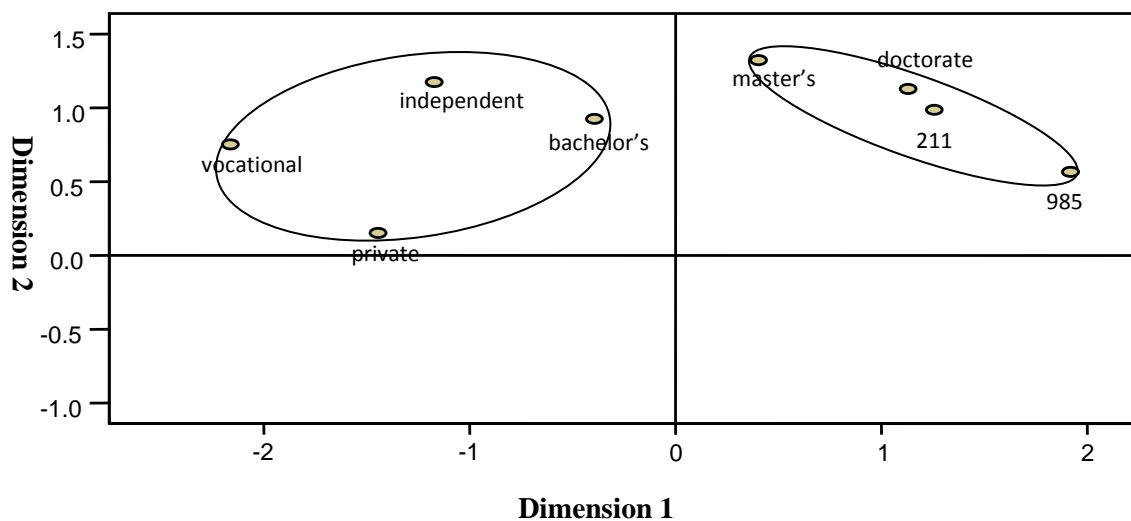
We decided to use 12 variables in conducting the multidimensional scaling analysis. These 12 variables are male percentage, average age, average time in position, professor and researcher percentage, doctorate degree percentage, degree from same institution percentage, engineering, sciences, medicine and agriculture speciality percentage, former position as party secretary and deputy secretary percentage, former position in same institution percentage, former position in education percentage, overseas degree percentage, and overseas study experience percentage. All variables, except for average age and average time in position, are in percentages. To conduct the multidimensional scaling analysis, variables in different scales had to be standardized. We kept average time in position in its original scale but standardized the other 11 variables into a scale with the maximum value at 10. With percentages the original maximum would be 100, and with average age the potential original maximum would be 100. Table 4 displays the standardized data.



Table 4  
12 Standardized Variables

	985	211	doctorate	master's	bachelor's	independent	vocational	private
Male	8.7	9	9.5	9.2	9.3	9.5	9.2	9.1
Average age	5.8	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.4	5.3	5.7
Average time in position	4.6	4.8	3.8	4.1	3.7	3.6	3.6	2.5
Professor	9.1	9.2	9	8.4	7.9	5.7	5.5	5.6
Doctorate degree	3.7	3.5	4.8	3.5	2.3	1.9	1.4	2.1
Same institution degree	3.3	1.2	1.2	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	0
Eng., sciences, medic. & agri.	5.9	3.3	4.1	3.3	3.6	4.2	2.3	4.3
Former position as party secretary or deputy	6	3.5	3.6	3.7	5.9	4.2	3	3.8
Former position in same institution	3.1	3.1	3.8	3.1	2.3	6	1.8	1.2
Former position in education	7.7	9.2	8.1	7.9	7.5	8.6	5.8	7.6
Overseas degree	1.2	1	0.8	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.2	2.9
Overseas study	3.8	3.3	2.7	1.4	1.2	0.7	0	1.1

The purpose of conducting the multidimensional scaling analysis was to examine the distances among party secretaries in the eight institution types. We analyzed the 12 standardized variables with SPSS 17.0 software to produce figure 1, which allowed a visual interpretation of the differences among the eight types of party secretaries.

**Figure 1****Derived Stimulus Configuration****Euclidean distance model**

The figure demonstrates that party secretaries in 985 institutions, 211 institutions, doctorate degree conferring institutions, and master's degree conferring institutions are not far away from each other. Party secretaries in 211 institutions and doctorate degree conferring institutions are very close to each other. The figure indicates that the eight party secretary types are roughly located in two areas with 985, 211, doctorate and master's institution party secretaries in one area and bachelor's, independent, vocational and private institution party secretaries in another. Party secretaries in 985 institutions and vocational institutions are the farthest away from each other.

Table 5  
Cluster Analysis Results

985	211	doctorate	master's	bachelor's	independent	vocational	private
1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2

The results of the cluster analysis corroborates the results of the multidimensional scaling analysis in that party secretaries from eight institution types can be categorized into two groups: those in 985, 211, doctorate degree conferring, and master's degree conferring institutions; and those in bachelor's degree conferring, independent, vocational, and private institutions. Since both multidimensional scaling analysis and cluster analysis results indicate that the eight party secretary types can be put into two categories, in the following paragraph we describe some of the characteristics of these two categories with information presented in table 2.

With average age between 54.7 and 58.1 party secretaries in the first category are older than those in the second category with average age between 52.9 and 57.1. On average party secretaries in the first category have been in their position longer than four years, whereas for those in the second category the average time in

To test what we found with the multidimensional scaling analysis, we conducted cluster analysis with the same 12 standardized variables in table 3. Cluster analysis is typically used to combine cases into groups. More specifically, cluster analysis is primarily designed to use variables as criteria for putting cases into groups, based on each case's scores on a given set of variables (George & Mallery, 2011). We used cluster analysis to combine party secretaries from eight institution types into two groups with the 12 standardized variables. Table 5 displays the results of the cluster analysis.

their position is less than four years. The vast majority in the first category are in the rank of professor, whereas in the second category the proportion of professors is smaller. More party secretaries in the first category than those in the second category have a doctorate degree. Some party secretaries in the first category obtained their degrees in the same institution where they work, whereas almost no one from the second category obtained a degree from the same institution. More party secretaries in the first category have their specialities in engineering, sciences, medicine or agriculture, and more party secretaries in the first category studied overseas.

We compare the results from this study with those from a study conducted in October 2006 investigating the characteristics of 1,792 higher education institution presidents (Niu & Zhan, 2007). Table 6 displays the results from the two studies.

Table 6  
Comparison of Party Secretaries and Presidents' Characteristics

	Party Secretaries		Presidents	
N		1,751		1,792
Gender %	M 92	F 8	M 95.5	F 4.5
Average age		55		52
Average time in position (yr)		3.8		4.1
Professor or researcher %		76		77.2
Associate professor or associate researcher %		13		22.8
Other ranks %		9		0
No rank %		2		0
Doctorate degree %		29		43.9
Master's degree %		40		30.2
Bachelor's degree %		30		25.4
College diploma %		0		0.4
Others %		1		0
Degree obtained from same institution %	y 9	n 91	y 15.4	n 84.6
Speciality %:				
engineering		23		30.9
sciences		11		15.1
humanities		10		10.3
economics		9		9.3
medicine		4		9.2
law		6		7.1
administration		12		5.4
education		8		5.2
philosophy		10		3.2
agriculture		1		2.5
history		2		1.9
others		4		0
Former position in same institution %	y 30	n 70	y 36.7	n 63.2
Former position in education system %	y 78	n 22	y 86.2	n 13.8
Overseas degree %	y 9	n 91	y 12.7	n 87.3
Overseas study %	y 18	n 82	y 32.2	n 67.8

The results of the comparison indicate that there are differences between party secretaries and presidents. Party secretaries are older; there are more female party secretaries; more presidents are professors with a doctorate degree; presidents have been in their position longer; more presidents have an overseas degree and

studied overseas; more party secretaries' specialities are in administration and philosophy, whereas more presidents' specialities are in engineering, sciences, or medicine; and more presidents had their former position in the same institution, whereas more party secretaries have worked outside of the education system.

## Conclusion and Discussion

We conclude that party secretaries in Chinese higher education institutions from whom data were collected are on average 55 years old. The vast majority of them are males, and two-thirds of them were in a higher education institution leadership position before receiving the current appointment. Two-thirds of them are at the rank of professor, and almost a third of them have a doctorate degree. Twenty-three percent of them have their highest degree in engineering.

Twenty-seven percent of the party secretaries were party secretaries before they were appointed to the current position. Almost a third of them were promoted from a position in the same institution. About two-thirds of them had their former position in the education system. Eighteen percent of them studied overseas and nine percent have at least one degree received overseas.

Both multidimensional scaling analysis and cluster analysis results indicate that party secretaries from the eight institution types can be put into two categories: those in 985, 211, doctorate degree conferring, and master's degree conferring institutions; and those in bachelor's degree conferring, independent, vocational, and private institutions. Party secretaries in the first category are older and have been in their position longer. More party secretaries in the first category are in the rank of professor, have a doctorate degree, and obtained at least one degree in the same institution. More party secretaries in the first category have their specialties in engineering, sciences, or medicine, and more party secretaries in the first category studied overseas.

The results of a comparison between party secretaries and presidents indicate that with more of them in the rank of professor with a doctorate degree presidents are more likely to be academic leaders, whereas party secretaries are more likely to be administrative leaders. However, since these party secretaries work in higher education institutions the majority are professors or researchers themselves.

This study provides rich and interesting information on who the party secretaries in

Chinese higher education institutions are, filling an obvious gap of existing literature about Chinese higher education. It also helps readers understand the organizational structure of the Chinese higher education system with regard to how it is administered. If we want to understand the Chinese higher education system, we need to have more knowledge about party secretaries working in higher education. It is useful to understand who they are. Still, there is more to be learned about these people who play a leading role in their institutions. The results of this study tell us who party secretaries are but not what they do. Future research can examine what party secretaries specifically do in Chinese higher education institutions. In addition, party secretaries in publicly funded institutions are appointed by a higher level of party committee, but party secretaries in privately funded institutions are hired by their board of trustees. Future research may investigate what factors are considered when party secretaries are appointed or hired.

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HUA JIANG is an associate professor at the Research Institute of Education Economics and Management, School of Humanities and Law, Northeastern University, in Shenyang, Liaoning, China. He received his Ph.D. in Management from Beijing University. His research interests include university governance and performance, private higher education, and mapping knowledge domain.

XIAOBIN LI is an associate professor at the Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies, Faculty of Education, Brock University, in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. He received his Ph. D. in Educational Administration from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. His research interests include Chinese education, education finance, education law, and quantitative methods in educational research.

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